

1992

# Wife Abuse and the Political System: A Middle Eastern Case Study

Mary E. Hegland

*Santa Clara University*, [mhegland@scu.edu](mailto:mhegland@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/anthro\\_fac\\_pubs](http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/anthro_fac_pubs)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Mary Hegland. (1992). Wife Abuse and the Political System: A Middle Eastern Case Study. In D. A. Counts, J. K. Brown, & J. C. Campbell (Eds.), *Sanctions and Sanctuary: Cultural Perspectives on the Beating of Wives*. Westview Press.

Reprinted with permission.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rschroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rschroggin@scu.edu).

---

## Wife Abuse and the Political System: A Middle Eastern Case Study

*Mary Elaine Hegland*

If a wife goes bad (said the mullah in explaining the Arabic of Surah 4, verse 34 of the Qor'an), or if there is a difference between husband and wife, first he should scold her and speak with her. If that does not work, he should become *ghar* with her—stop interacting with her. If that does not work, he should administer corporal punishment—but there should be no resulting marks on her body—it should not turn black and blue.

### INTRODUCTION

Although wife abuse is common in Iran, it is a subject which has received almost no attention from scholars and little has been written on it. The purpose of this article is to examine the problem, to show the connection between wife-beating and the Iranian political system, and to raise questions for further research. The data on which this analysis is based come from my own research as well as from published sources. The two case histories of wife abuse presented exemplify social process in a political system characterized by arbitrariness and the need to dominate. The degree to which a woman could be abused depended upon the power relationships and resources that people were able to muster in their continuous effort to control others and to avoid being manipulated themselves.

### THE RESEARCH

My data are from my 1978–1979 field research in the village of Aliabad in southwestern Iran as well as other periods spent in Iran between 1966 and 1978 and from interviews in the United States between 1987 and 1990 with mainly middle-aged Iranian women (who had received some of their education in America) as well as their mothers and aunts visiting from Iran. During my research in Iran between June 1978 and December 1979 I did not

interview my informants specifically about wife-beating, but my interviews in the United States did focus on the topic.<sup>1</sup> Most of the events I describe here occurred between June 1978 and December 1979, although I also recount incidents that happened within the memory of informants. As it is not possible to ascertain current conditions in Iran I use the past tense.

### THE VILLAGE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND WIFE ABUSE

In 1978 and 1979 Aliabad was a large village of some 3,000 people located half an hour by bus away from the outskirts of the city of Shiraz, capital of the province of Fars in southwestern Iran. Local political factions battled for control over agricultural land and the powerful position of headman for the absentee landlord. Because there was only a weak centralized government before the oil boom of the 1960s and 1970s, local factions had to rely on the strength of their fighting men for political power. During the relative anarchy of the revolutionary period between 1978 and 1980, local police control declined and competition between local factions in Aliabad resumed. (For more discussion on the political system of Aliabad, see Hooglund [Hegland] 1982.)

In the local political system, young men were valued as fighters while women were valued as reproducers and as the means of creating or solidifying relations with other groups through marriage. Women's work and hospitality were invaluable and their role was central in producing support for their kinsmen in the local system, where repetitive and intense social interaction was required to maintain political alliances. (For more discussion of the roles of women in the Aliabad political system see Hegland 1986b.)

Although devalued as persons, women were valued as resources (see Vieille 1979). If men could control women, they could utilize their labor, so important in the political process. Women were also valuable as a means of demonstrating control and authority. The protection of dependents of both sexes, and their submission and obedience, effectively signaled to other political actors the dominance and political strength of a leader and his faction.<sup>2</sup>

In this fluctuating, authoritarian village political system, men demonstrated their superiority by intimidating others. To make others—enemies, followers, and dependents—afraid of them, they engaged in acts of violence. It was incumbent upon those in authority to instill "respect," or more accurately fear, in those for whom they were responsible in order to extract the required compliance and correct behavior. Children and women were chastised in order to force them to live up to the expectations of the system. According to Erika Friedl, who has been conducting research on women's issues and child rearing in Iran,

The beating of children is an educational device. In my village research site, children have to be beaten to keep them on the right path and if a woman misbehaves, she has to be beaten for the same reason. Beating is a teaching device, but it's also a means of dealing with insubordination and dissent. (Personal communication, October 4, 1989)

In order to carry on their political and economic struggles, the older generation had to control the younger generation. Young men were needed for their labor and their fighting abilities. In addition to the political work a young man might carry out for his father, sons were often a main source of money, work, and other resources for their parents. Young women were needed for their labor power and for their reproductive capacities.

Parents obtained a wife for their son, but they often sought to minimize the contact and affection between the couple, fearing that the wife would compete for the resources produced by him. By physically abusing his wife the son served the purposes of the older generation and the kin group as a whole.

In Aliabad, people were the most important resource. Control over property was not secure; rather one needed people and their connections to get and keep control over land and other resources. Women were a means of gathering people and connections and were, therefore, valuable and carefully controlled. Often women learned the political importance of controlling people and sought to build their own power by influencing others.<sup>3</sup>

The treatment of a young bride was sufficient to quell any thoughts of independence. Generally, she improved her situation and gained power by fulfilling her duties and producing children. Whereas a younger woman was kept in line through force and intimidation, an older woman developed a stake in her husband's family and kinship group. Because of her children, she was willing to do whatever she could to support the interests of her husband's family. She gained power in proportion to her effectiveness in working for the family and keeping family members under control. Young women and young men learned that the best way to gain power and a more comfortable life was to manipulate the system, to build up a power base, to become the people who controlled and intimidated others. From being a weak and subservient bride herself, a woman often turned into a mother-in-law who tightly controlled and even aided in the abuse of new daughters-in-law (see also Brown 1982, *in press*; Mernissi 1987; and Rassam 1980). Older women exchanged their services as controllers of young women for acceptance and status in their husbands' family. A woman wanted the approval of her husband and the community that resulted from her good management of her daughter-in-law. She also wanted to retain the devotion of her son rather than lose it to the younger woman.



## MARRIAGE, KINSHIP, AND THE EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN

When I was born, the minute they told my mother it was a girl she began to cry bitterly. She refused to feed me for three days. She was ashamed in front of her in-laws. But my aunts were happy and showing the baby to everyone. Then my aunts tried to tell her — you should be ashamed, she's a lovely baby, you should be happy — so she gave up and fed me. She thought it was shameful for an important man to have a daughter.

These words of an urban friend illustrate the lesson learned by girls at an early age: they are valued less than boys. Girls were not expected to promote their own interests but to be available to others for service. They were raised to be homebound, obedient, and extremely concerned about their reputations.

A number of factors made a wife subservient to and dependent on her husband. Young women were carefully guarded, married off young — ten to twelve was not unusual in the recent past (see also Guppy 1988:44 and Haeri 1983:242, 243) — and then subdued as new wives. An age difference of ten or more years between bride and groom was typical, and the bride usually had a lower level of education than the groom. Most girls were removed from school at puberty and were, therefore, unable to obtain an education that might allow them to support themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The requirement that a bride be a virgin caused girls to be sheltered, isolated, and inexperienced in dealing with others outside of a small group of family, kin, and neighbors. Traditionally, Iranian women were not allowed to make decisions concerning their own lives (see also Farmanfarmaian 1976).<sup>5</sup> Every effort was made to keep women economically dependent and therefore unable to leave the control of their fathers, husbands, or brothers.

In my village research site, if a woman were to work, the male in charge of her would be considered unable to support her, a shameful state of affairs. Although girls from less economically comfortable families worked in the local carpet shop, they were taken out before marriage.<sup>6</sup> Only some twelve adult women out of a village of about 3,000 did some work for money outside of the home. All except one of these women were single, widowed, or the wives of men who could not support them.

Young village women were supposed to stay at home as much as possible and were to turn to close neighbors and relatives for companionship (see Friedl 1983:222). This isolation in a watchful group of female guardians restricted the access of young women to potentially helpful connections and the examples set by more independent women. They had little or no perception of alternatives. Young women could only leave the village in the company of relatives. After extracting a promise of secrecy, one village woman

told me of her friendship with a city woman whom she visited periodically and who helped her out with little gifts. This type of friendship was unusual.

Men were raised to be aggressive, to devalue women and their activities, to use violence to get what they wanted, and to demonstrate the power and strength required for political survival. Men were expected to keep control over their womenfolk; failure to do so meant a loss of standing for the entire family. Many men were willing to use corporal punishment to extract obedience and maintain control, and they received social support for doing so.<sup>7</sup>

Most women were not able to escape from abuse. Beatings emphasized their position of subservience and dependence and kept wives cowed and acquiescent. People were not eager to intervene, and some women counselled patience; this is what women must tolerate and live with. Forcible defloration on the wedding night, compelled sexual intercourse, and beatings were acts of male dominance and female submission that were a repeated reminder to the woman of her position of relative powerlessness and the necessity of obedience to her husband and others in authority over her.

A woman generally had to come to terms with a violent relationship without external help. Separation and divorce were shameful and, because women rarely could support themselves, were possible only if their fathers or brothers were willing to take on the economic burden and the embarrassment of sheltering them. As she was no longer a virgin, a divorcee would enter a second marriage with even less leverage than she had enjoyed in her first.

The requirement that women must protect the reputation, the *qaybat*, of the family generally made them reluctant to talk to others about how their husbands treated them and kept them quiet about abuse. Ziba, in the case study below, even denied the abuse when her mother asked her about it.<sup>8</sup> The repeated invasion of their persons, the attacks against their bodies which they felt they must tolerate, and the stories of the beatings and forced sexual relations endured by other women formed for wives a bleak image of their lives and the relative hopelessness of changing their situation.

The Iranian kinship system is bilateral and couples generally maintain ties with both sides of the family. Village endogamy was the rule. The association between a young woman and her own family was usually close. Shortly after marriage a bride was expected to visit her parents for a few days, and during her marriage a woman maintained her connection with her natal family and usually visited often at their home.

A wife was not to complain of mistreatment from her husband. Her husband was expected to maintain complete authority over her and her father had no right to interfere. However, since her relationship with her father and brother continued, they were assumed to still care for her and be con-

cerned about her welfare. It did not speak well of a man's position and power if his daughter or sister were consistently mistreated and others in the community were aware of it. Should it come to the attention of a woman's father that her husband was beating her excessively, her father might provide a refuge for her. He would take no action against the husband, however, for a man had full authority to treat his wife as he wished and no father wished to become involved in controversy over a daughter's treatment.

The result of these contradictions was ambivalence about the responsibility for married women that lent itself to manipulation and negotiation between a woman's husband and her male relatives. The outcome of the negotiations depended on the relative power of the husband versus the woman's father or brother.

Iranian men beat their wives and sisters when the women challenged the hierarchical, authoritarian system. If wives disobeyed husbands or talked back to them, if they did not immediately and cheerfully perform the labor required of them, if they were not sufficiently submissive and sympathetic to in-laws, they were punished. Correct behavior was not enough; correct *affect* also was owed to superiors. Brothers were in charge of sisters; they were responsible for correct behavior by a sister toward other males and their obedience to superiors—including themselves. Beatings reminded women of their duties and of their relatively defenseless position in the social system.

Wife abuse, then, was a result of the hierarchical and violent nature of the political system and became one more arena where men vied for political power, thus perpetuating the system. Abuse also effectively taught young women that the best way to beat the system was to join it and become manipulators and abusers themselves—often as older women through their sons.

### WIFE-BEATING IN IRAN

Wife-beating was common in Iran. Almost every Iranian whom I questioned in the United States related stories of abuse. According to a city woman who had visited a number of villages and who was on close terms with several village women who came to work for her as maids,

Among villagers, wife-beating is very, very common; they do it all the time. In my country it is common among poor people. Naneh Kayvan (her maid and close friend from a village) said all villagers beat up their wives (Personal communication, October 21, 1989).

Ethnographic short stories (actual occurrences written in short story form) by Friedl (1989) support these observations. In Friedl's book we read

of a brother who beats his sister for greeting her cousin in public, and of another brother who beats his sister for talking back (Friedl 1989:48, 132). Husbands beat their wives because they are disobedient, insubordinate, or bad tempered; because they talk back or complain about the husband's mother and sister; as a result of complaints from his sister; to reprimand for adultery; or because the husband felt upset and frustrated (Friedl 1989:50, 55, 64, 69, 84, 94, 95, 226). Some people argue that wife-beating does not occur in urban areas or among well-educated peoples (see Bauer 1985:173 for example). There is, however, evidence that it occurs in towns and cities as well as villages and is common among all classes.<sup>9</sup>

### Wife-beating in Aliabad

Wife-beating was not discussed openly in Aliabad. On one occasion I was present when a young woman wept softly as she told her older neighbor about abuse from her husband. Another young woman told about episodes of physical abuse from her husband and said that in frustration she had wept and repeatedly hit her head against the wall. In thinking about his upcoming wedding, a friend revealed the fear that he might come to beat his wife; his father beat his mother.

Two cases which came to my attention resulted in separation. First is the case of "Ziba," the daughter of a village headman, who cleverly obtains what she wants by living up to the ideal of a "passive" and obedient daughter. In the second case, the relatives of "Goltaj" told me about her situation with her husband. In both cases the relative political power of the protagonists was related to the outcome of their conflict over the wife abuse.

Ziba told me her story when I visited her father's home during her stay there.

I was married two years ago. . . . When I went, I had earrings, bracelets, and other jewelry. My husband's sister took them from me. She said, "The price of gold is going up—let me sell them for you and give you the money"—and then she never gave me the money. My mother-in-law took the money that was given to me at the time of my wedding. When the baby was born she took the money that was given to me at this time too.

My husband is twenty-two; he works at the gravel factory. When they get extra money from their shares and he buys me a lamb so I get meat, my mother-in-law is jealous. She's jealous of anything I get. I haven't had a new *chador* (veil) or anything else since I was married—my mother-in-law won't allow it. She won't allow her son to visit my parents. She says, "What do you want to do there?"

When I wash the baby's clothes, she asks me, "Why are you constantly washing the baby's clothes?" If I'm washing clothes and the baby is lying in the sun, she won't pick her up—even though the baby is her son's child. She

complains to her son, "Look, she comes and washes clothes in the *hoze* (small courtyard pool)." Where *should* I wash them?

At first he believed his mother, but then he came to realize it was his mother's fault. He gets 3,500 tomans a month.<sup>10</sup> Someone who gets this salary should have his own rooms by now, should have a home. But his father buys and sells animals. His father says to him, "Lend me some money; I want to buy an animal"—and then doesn't give the money back.

He used to come home from the factory and would laugh and joke with me a couple of hours, I swear! But then they said bad things about me. They said, "Your wife is no good." Then he would come home and go over to their room. I would wait without eating dinner—I felt it was better to eat together—and then when he came back at midnight, he said his mother had pressured him into eating dinner there. They said bad things about me so that he would come home from the factory and stay over there until bedtime, and even then when he came home he wouldn't talk to me, as they had told him not to. What sort of a life is this? A person is alone all the time and then even in the evening alone, going to sleep alone to wake up in the morning and be alone.

I never told my mother how it was for me. When the neighbors told her, and she asked me about it, I'd say they were lying.

Then on that day, the father came home shouting and swearing and said the shepherd had taken the animals to drink and two of his lambs had fallen in the water and drowned. They told me and I didn't say anything. He kept on shouting and going on.

When he came home, they told him that two of the lambs had died and I wasn't sorry about it, I didn't take it hard. He beat me from eight at night and continued to beat me until twelve midnight. At twelve o'clock I fell asleep without being aware of anything, not even the thought of my father and mother.

When I woke up I was ill, and I kept vomiting—I hadn't eaten dinner or lunch the day before. They took me to my father's and my parents took me to the hospital. My husband stayed with me the first two days in the hospital. All of the doctors and nurses came to ask me how I got bruises all over my face and body. I said I fell down a stairs—they doubted it. His mother and father scolded him because he stayed with me. They kept telling him to get a divorce. He said to them, "I haven't got tired of this wife, I want my wife, I want this wife."

When I got out of the hospital, I came to stay with my parents. His parents kept encouraging him to get a divorce. At first, at night he ate supper here at my parents' house and then went there to sleep. But his parents scolded him. He wanted to move to another home, but they wouldn't let him, so he stopped going home after work. He wanted to move in with his mother's brother on the other side of the highway. His uncle had told me, "I know what my sister's like—come and live with us." So he took a pickup truck to his parents' house to get his stuff. They wouldn't let him take it. Then they fought with the uncle who then fought with my husband, saying, "Why are your parents like this?" Finally, the aunt came over to my parent's house to

get me to come back. They want me back now so that their son will come back. But I wouldn't go, and then the aunt fought with them.

I won't go until my husband comes back. I will only go if my father tells me to go. They won't let me have any of my clothes and things. Finally my parents told him, "She doesn't have any clothes; she has to wear her sister's clothes," so he got me a blouse and a couple of loose house pants, but no shoes. Now I'm waiting to see what my husband and my father will say. Now I'm in my father's house. I'll do whatever he says.

It's because of his parents. Whenever he beat me, it was the parents who ordered him to do it. He always swore his parents ordered him to do it. He was always sorry afterwards. He would realize his parents were wrong. I used to work so hard. I swept my mother-in-law's house and did so much.

Although Ziba blamed her husband's parents for her troubles, her mother felt Ziba's husband was also at fault. "Ziba and the baby have been here for forty days," she said, "and he has never asked about his daughter. Some people just don't care about their children."

Sometime later as I was hurrying through a village alleyway, I heard a call; Ziba had seen me and urged me to come up and see her new home. She was pleased with her modest, second story room. Now that she and her husband were away from the influence of his parents, she indicated, things were much better.

In spite of abuse, not all women were entirely cowed. Ziba managed to get a home for herself and her husband away from his parents and against their will. The same political system in which women were used as a means of forming alliances between families also allowed them to use their intermediate position to achieve their own aims.

Ziba behaved passively, as a proper young woman, saying "I'm in my father's house. I'll do whatever he says." Ziba's success in the competition over her husband was due to her father's eminence in the village. Publicity over her battering enabled Ziba to obtain her father's support for the couple's move to their own home. His father-in-law's respected position in the village community also helped the young man (who did not wish to lose his wife) to stand up to his parents.

Goltaj's husband, Mehdi, often physically abused her and had several times sent her back to her father's home. When he wanted his wife back, he would send his mother to fetch her. Finally Goltaj's brother Cyrus did not hand her over to the mother when, at Mehdi's direction, she came to fetch her. Cyrus insisted that Mehdi himself, along with several of his male kin, must come after her and they must talk the matter over. Mehdi refused. On the evening of December 8, 1978, Mehdi attacked and stabbed his brother-in-law Cyrus in the side, seriously wounding him. The attack occurred during the religious self-flagellation procession of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Hosein. Mehdi said his attack was prompted by loyalty to the shah as

he was a monarchist and Cyrus was a village leader supporting the revolutionary forces, but the whole village knew Mehdi was furious over Cyrus's refusal to return Goltaj to him.

Crowds of visitors, anxious to show their support for Cyrus against Mehdi, came to see Cyrus in the hospital. The incident brought about a shift in village opinion from pro-shah or at least accommodating to the shah's regime, to pro-Khomeini and pro-revolution. If this is how shah supporters behaved, villagers felt, he and his followers should be ousted.

Cyrus gradually recovered. On February 11, 1979, during the hubbub of the day the government fell, several people beat Mehdi up. He was taken into the nearby city and when he returned, he went to Cyrus's courtyard. He called for Cyrus's uncle (this man was also Cyrus's step-father and Goltaj's father)<sup>11</sup> and when he came to the door, Mehdi and the others so severely beat the older man's head with large sticks that he was taken to the hospital. In a vengeful mood, a crowd attacked the shop belonging to Mehdi's mother's brother, pulling down the roof, taking goods and candy, and tearing up the *chadors* from Mecca.

Although some members of the clan thought they should kill Mehdi to demonstrate that they were not weak, no further violence occurred; rather, Cyrus's clan pursued the matter through the court system. Later in the summer, Cyrus's new bride commented on the case:

Goltaj is sixteen. She was fourteen when she got married. Cyrus was against her marrying Mehdi — boys are together in the alleyways, so they know each other better. But his step-father said to him, "So, are *you* going to support her then?" She has been living with her father for about a year now. They get 600 toman every month from the husband for her and the child's expenses. It would be better if she got the divorce; then they could get the money from the brideprice and so on. Sometimes her husband says he'll give her a divorce, sometimes not. His family tell him, "Divorce her. She's no good; you can't get along with her."

Now they're waiting for a hearing in court to see what will happen. If she didn't have the little girl it would be all right; she could get married again. But it's rare for a divorced woman with children to remarry — her new husband wouldn't accept the children. (Goltaj's sister-in-law, bride of Cyrus, July 17, 1979)

In October of 1979 I learned from Mehdi's sister that Mehdi had gone to get his daughter. The little girl was now with Mehdi's mother who lived with him and cared for the child. According to Mehdi's sister, the couple were going to get a divorce.<sup>12</sup>

Both of these cases reveal the determination of parents to retain control over their sons and to avoid losing them to the daughters-in-law. Ziba was in competition with her husband's parents over her husband and the

resources he provided. A widow, such as Mehdi's mother, often felt especially dependent upon her son and thus vulnerable to loss of influence over him.<sup>13</sup>

The case of Goltaj illustrates one important reason why women will not complain of ill treatment or leave their abusing husbands. If they do, their children are generally lost to them. When Mehdi came to get his baby daughter no one stopped him because everyone recognized his right to his child.

A husband also had the right to mistreat his wife. Goltaj's relatives did not mobilize to protect her or to get revenge on Mehdi for beating her.<sup>14</sup> It was only when Cyrus was injured that his kinsmen took action. Injury to a male could not be tolerated.

Cyrus was a popular young man in the village and he had a larger kinship group than did Mehdi. Although Cyrus had stronger backing in the village, Mehdi had counted on the intervention of forces outside of the village. Mehdi believed he had the power of Iranian government forces behind him. If necessary, local gendarmes and other government bodies such as the court system would back him in his violence against Cyrus, he believed.

Up until that point, the rural police had protected pro-shah individuals in the village. Mehdi's stabbing of Cyrus took place, however, in the midst of the revolution when the balance of power was in flux. Villagers sensed the decline in the power of the pro-shah forces. Their analysis of political conditions, together with their outrage at the stabbing of Cyrus, led the majority of villagers to swing their support to Cyrus and the pro-Khomeini revolutionary forces. The Pahlavi government fell about two months later on February 11, 1979. Mehdi lacked support either within or outside the village, whereas Cyrus was connected to the new government. Goltaj did not go back to her husband's home for more abuse but stayed with her brother and father. Mehdi was furious at Cyrus for providing a refuge for Goltaj but could do nothing.

## CONCLUSION

The men in Aliabad were pressured by the authoritarian political system into obeying their elders in exchange for receiving valuable resources — such as wives. The men, in turn, abused their wives, cowing them and usually leaving them with the feeling that they had few alternatives but to submit to their husbands. Their labor was, then, often put to use in the political system. As they grew older, women, through bitter experience, learned how to survive and use their resources and manipulate others to gain power. Among their more precious resources were their sons. Older women who had suffered under the senior generation in their husbands' families in turn tyrannized their daughters-in-law.



Although wives were valued for their labor and reproductive capacity, their in-laws often felt they must be controlled and distanced from their husbands. Parents who relied upon the income and labor of their son, considered it to be in their best interest for their daughter-in-law to be abused, cowed, helpless, and submissive rather than a part of a decision-making husband-wife team. In turn, a young wife often felt it was in her own interests to leave her in-law's home and tried to persuade her husband to move.

In the authoritarian, hierarchical village political system, wife abuse was just one way in which inferiors were connect to superiors. Sons who were dominated by their elders in turn subjugated their wives and older women — who had been suppressed in their youth — encouraged the repression of their daughters-in-law.

In Aliabad, however, such relationships were not necessarily static, but rested on power differences that might change. For example, sons working in the new jobs available as a result of the oil boom were less dependent upon their fathers and less subject to the wishes of the older generation. Or women might have more access to resources such as education and jobs and be less susceptible to abuse from their husbands. A young bride might develop resources and a power base in her husband's home or a women accrue power over her lifetime. Eventually an older woman might be surrounded by loving children and caring for a helpless and socially isolated old husband who had previously abused her.

Men with greater political power could both abuse their wives with greater impunity and could more readily protect sisters and daughters from abuse. A man, because of his attachment to his abused daughter or sister and out of concern for his own reputation, might provide refuge for her, especially if he were in a more powerful political position than the abusive husband. If, however, the husband were politically powerful, the abuse would be less likely to come to public attention. In Aliabad abused wives were subject to the vicissitudes of the political system. Political change might alter the relative power of in-laws, and such changes would affect sanctions against abuse and the sanctuary available to an abused wife.

The case of Ziba shows how an apparently helpless abused wife was able to use abuse by her husband, her obedience to social expectations, and the higher status of her father over her husband to gain a home for herself and her husband separate from her in-laws. In the hierarchical, fluctuating political system of an Iranian village, wife abuse could become an issue in political competition among male in-laws. As seen in the case of Goltaj, the ability to abuse a woman or to protect a woman from abuse changed with the fluctuating political power of the protagonists.

## NOTES

The name of the village and all names of persons have been changed in order to protect privacy. For research and writing funding, I am grateful to the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies; the Anthropology Department and The Southwest Asian and North Africa program of SUNY, Binghamton; the Educational Foundation of the American Association of University Women; the Center for Near Eastern and North African Studies of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; the National Endowment for the Humanities; Franklin and Marshall College; and Santa Clara University. My deep gratitude goes to those women who shared with me their often distressing stories of mistreatment, and especially to some of my close friends who revealed painful memories in hopes of helping to bring about positive change. Generous assistance and constructive criticism has been provided by Akbar Aghajanian, Erika Friedl, Patricia Higgins, Anne Marie Ominski, Nancy Tapper, the editors of this volume, and others whose names are best not mentioned.

1. One of the reasons for the dearth of social science material on wife-beating and battering is likely the reluctance of researchers to tackle these sensitive topics.

2. See also Papaek (1973, 1979, and 1984); Sharma (1983); Sanday (1981); and Vieille (1979).

3. For discussion of women's labor and its political importance as well a women's activities in politics see Hegland (1986b and in press). For discussion of political system and process see Hooglund (Hegland) (1982) and Hegland (1986a).

4. Although the fiance of one young woman, the daughter of an enlightened school teacher, gave his approval for her to attend university, the future father-in-law rejected her plans to have a career. "My son is perfectly capable of supporting her," was his outraged comment.

5. In a dramatic illustration of this point, Erika Friedl relates the words of a woman who resisted her marriage: "I was about ten or eleven then, before I even had my first period, but I had grown quite a bit and no longer was so weak and skinny. I cried and screamed and kicked and scratched and bit like a cornered cat, but they just beat me up, my mother and my father did. My sister cried with me. My father's brother, when he came to sign the marriage contract, even clobbered me with his rifle butt until I said yes" (Friedl 1989:185, 186; see also Guppy 1988:32, 40, 43, 56, 156).

6. Many men elsewhere in Iran also did not wish their wives to work. Farman-farmaian states, "In Iran we have discovered that many divorces and family disputes result from the wife's desire to work and the husband's refusal to give consent" (1976:28—29). See also Guppy (1988:30) and Friedl (1981).

7. A researcher reports on a father who supported his son-in-law's beating his daughter and, in fact, urged him to use a chain for flogging her (Fathi 1985:155).

Not all Iranians share these attitudes or feel that wife-beating is acceptable. One urban Iranian woman told me, "My father thinks anyone who beats his wife is out of his mind."

8. Friedl related an aunt's comments about her niece: "I myself have seen her with a black eye, her veil drawn half across her face. 'The cow hit me,' she said. The cow indeed" (1989:94).

9. Although one urban informant felt wife-beating is not common among the educated, stating, "The educated don't beat up their wives unless they get very mean and aggressive," other indications are to the contrary. During the course of conducting research in Iran in summer of 1989, Erika Friedl asked an Iranian social scientist and his wife about wife-beating: "At first they said it was a class thing. The lower classes do it more. Then they looked at each other and one would say, 'So and so beats his wife,' and the other said, 'And so and so in such and such a department does it,' until between the two of them they came up with a whole list of wife-beating cases in the academic community" (Erika Friedl, personal communication, October 14, 1989).

Educated Iranian friends living in the United States told me of the physical abuse of their relatively well-educated female relatives in Iran, and of their own physical abuse and that of their friends here in the United States. According to Erika Friedl (personal communication, October 4 and 14, 1989), wife abuse appears to be increasing in Iran. In recent years the responsibility for controlling and punishing women has become shared by larger circles of men. After the revolution, groups of men calling themselves "Whippers of Naked Women" roamed the city to chastise improperly covered women. Revolutionary guards, of course, feel themselves responsible for the correct behavior and appearance of all women. For an example, see Friedl (1989:85-86). Also see Hegland (1982:500 and 1983:188). With government-required *hejab* (modesty), the State has also taken upon itself the functions of monitoring and controlling women.

Wife abuse appears to be common, at least in some areas, elsewhere in the Middle East as well. See Sawsan el-Messiri (1979:538); Nayra Atiya (1982); Nawal El Saadawi (1983); and Wedad Zenie-Ziegler (1988) for example.

10. In the late 1970s, there were about 7.5 toman to the dollar.

11. It was not uncommon for a man to marry his brother's widow.

12. Both cases have characteristics similar to those found by researchers in wife abuse in the U.S. and elsewhere. See Campbell (1985); Levinson (1988); Masumura (1979); Walker (1979 and 1984); and Yllo and Bograd (1988).

13. Other stories told of great control by mothers-in-law, such as the mother-in-law sleeping between the couple! See also Ghalem (1984) and Friedl (1989:94).

Upper- and middle-class women, as well as village women, have marital problems because of interference by their in-laws. In his analysis of 285 cases, an Iranian psychiatrist found marital problems causing difficulty for 40 percent of the women. The leading marital issue among these women was the "woman's struggle to free herself from in-law interference." (Bagheri 1981:47)

14. In cross-cultural research on wife abuse, Masumura found that "in most societies, wife abuse, whether homicidal or not, does not call forth revenge by the wife's kin" (1979:55). Vieille has likewise found Iranian village women to be devalued (1979:197-456).

### REFERENCES CITED

- Atiya, Nayra. 1982. *Khul-Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Bagheri, Abbas S. 1981. Precipitating Factors of Neurotic Reactions in Middle and Upper-Middle Class Persian Women (Iran). *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 27:47—51.
- Bauer, Janet. 1985. Demographic Change, Women and the Family in a Migrant Neighborhood of Teheran. *In Women and the Family in Iran*. Asghar Fathi, ed. Pp. 158—186. Leiden: E. H. Brill.
- Brown, Judith K. 1982. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Middle-Aged Women. *Current Anthropology* 23:143—156.
- . In press. Introduction to the First Edition and Addendum. *In In Her Prime: New Views of Middle-Aged Women*. Second Edition. Virginia Kerns and Judith K. Brown, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Campbell, Jacquelyn C. 1985. Beating of Wives: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Victimology* 10:174—185.
- Farmanfarmaian, Khodadad. 1976. Women and Decision Making: With Special Reference to Iran and Other Developing Countries. *Labour and Society* 1:25—32.
- Fathi, Asghar. 1985. Social Integration in the Traditional Urban Family. *In Women and the Family in Iran*. Asghar Fathi, ed. Pp. 151—157. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Friedl, Erika. 1981. Women and the Division of Labor in an Iranian Village. *Middle East Research and Information Project Reports*, 95:12—18.
- . 1983. State Ideology and Village Women. *In Women and Revolution in Iran*. Guity Nashat, ed. Pp. 217—230. Boulder: Westview Press, Inc.
- . 1989. *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Ghalemi, Ali. 1984. *A Wife for My Son*. Chicago: Banner Press.
- Guppy, Shusha. 1988. *The Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Haeri, Shahla. 1983. The Institution of Mut'a Marriage in Iran: A Formal and Historical Perspective. *In Women and Revolution in Iran*. Guity Nashat, ed. Pp. 231—252. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Hegland, Mary Elaine. 1982. "Traditional" Iranian Women: How They Cope. *The Middle East Journal* 36:483—501.
- . 1983. Aliabad Women: Revolution as Religious Activity. *In Women and Revolution in Iran*. Guity Nashat, ed. Pp. 171—194. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- . 1986a. Imami Khomai's Village: Recruitment to Revolution. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, State University of New York, Binghamton.
- . 1986b. Political Roles of Iranian Village Women. *Middle East Research and Information Project Reports* 138:14—19, 46.
- . In press. Political Roles of Aliabad Women: The Public/Private Dichotomy Transcended. *In Shifting Boundaries: Gender Roles in the Middle East, Past and Present*. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron, eds. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

- Hooglund (Hegland), Mary. 1982. Religious Ritual and Political Struggle in an Iranian Village. *Middle East Research and Information Project Reports* 102:10—17, 23.
- Levinson, David. 1988. Family Violence in Cross-Cultural Perspective. In *Handbook of Family Violence*. Vincent B. Van Hasselt, Randall L. Morrison, Alan S. Bellack, and Michel Hersen, eds. Pp. 435—455. New York: Plenum Press.
- Masumura, Wilfred T. 1979. Wife Abuse and Other Forms of Aggression. *Victimology: An International Journal* 4:46—59.
- Mernissi, Fatima. 1987. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- el-Messiri, Sawzan. 1979. Self-Images of Traditional Urban Women in Cairo. In *Women in the Muslim World*. Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds. Pp. 522—540. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Papanek, Hanna. 1973. Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15:289—325.
- . 1979. Family Status Production. The "Work" and "Non-Work" of Women. *Signs* 4:775—781.
- . 1984. False Specialization and the Purdah of Scholarship—A Review Article. *Journal of Asian Studies* 44:127—148.
- Rassam, Amal. 1980. Women and Domestic Power in Morocco. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12:171—179.
- El Saadawi, Nawal. 1983. *Woman at Point Zero*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Sanday, Peggy Reeves. 1981. The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study. *Journal of Social Issues* 37:5—27.
- Sharma, Ursula. 1983. *Women, Work, and Property in North-West India*. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.
- Vicille, Paul. 1979. Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics. In *Women in the Muslim World*. Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds. Pp. 451—472. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Walker, Lenore E. 1979. *The Battered Woman*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.
- . 1984. *The Battered Woman Syndrome*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Yllo, Kersti and Michele Bograd, eds. 1988. *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*. Newbury Park California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Zenie-Ziegler, Wedad. 1988. *In Search of Shadows: Conversations with Egyptian Women*. London: Zed Books.